

New Community Policing Model Is Tough On Crime

Patrick J. Harnett

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More than eight months ago, I joined Mayor Eddie Perez, who asked me to help him re-engineer the Hartford Police Department into a more robust organization with a full commitment to community policing. My many years in the New York Police Department, coupled with six years of consulting with urban police departments nationally and internationally, have given me a wide perspective on what police can accomplish when properly organized and led.

Although each city has its own distinct character, there are certain commonalities among police officers everywhere. First, most police officers are remarkable in their resilience and their unwavering commitment to public service, often in spite of being underappreciated and misunderstood. Second, most police officers show an unusual ability to adapt to what often must seem, in view of frequent changes in top management and policies, like schizophrenic leadership. Finally, despite being whipsawed by policy changes in the past, most police officers will still respond enthusiastically to positive leadership that provides them with a clear and workable plan.

I would assert emphatically that there is nothing wrong with the caliber of officers in the HPD. By and large, these are great cops. But in the past, the department was not organizing and supporting them the way it should have. The result was a police organization that was not serving either the public or its own officers very well.

Like most urban police departments around the country, the HPD was dominated for nearly 40 years by responses to emergency calls for service. The police became so driven by 911 emergency calls that, as an institution, they forgot their core missions of controlling crime and protecting neighborhoods. As far back as the 1960s, police leaders were recognizing the widening police/community gap. As they tried to rebuild the connections, however, many departments drifted toward a service model that placed far more emphasis on addressing social issues than on fighting crime. So, for the next 20 or 30 years, community policing gained a reputation among police officers themselves as being soft on crime.

As we develop our new neighborhood-based community-policing program in Hartford,

we want the best of both worlds - a police department that is both responsive to our communities and extremely effective against criminals. We are moving away from the tired old model under which middle managers and supervisors were only responsible for what happened during their respective shifts. Captains, lieutenants and sergeants are being given ownership of smaller and more manageable geographic areas. They have the resources and the authority to address crime and disorder and to develop strategies with a true local focus. They'll be working closely with the members and leaders of our communities to identify and remedy residents' concerns about the quality of life in their neighborhoods.

At the same time, the core mission of reducing crime, fear and disorder will remain paramount. As the HPD develops better systems to deliver timely and accurate crime information to police officers and supervisors, there is a more focused and determined atmosphere in the department. More than ever before, the people of the HPD are talking about crime, developing and implementing strategies to reduce crime, and relentlessly assessing the effectiveness of these strategies. There is a renewed emphasis on what we the police were created to do and are best suited to accomplish - pursuing the criminals who sow chaos and disorder in our city's neighborhoods.

I'm reluctant to measure our recent successes in statistical terms because when even one family suffers the loss of a loved one, citing numbers seems like a shallow and meaningless response. Two weeks back, we had three senseless deaths of young people in this city, each of which could break your heart. But for the four months prior to those deaths, there was only one murder in Hartford.

We are winning the battle against violent crime, and as our neighborhood policing plan takes root, we will begin to win against property crime and quality-of-life offenses, too. Working together with the community and focusing on our core missions, Hartford police officers are saving lives. Police do matter.

Patrick J. Harnett is Hartford's police chief. He will speak Tuesday at the MetroHartford Alliance's Rising Star Breakfast at the Bushnell. For more information, please call 860-525-4451 Ext. 234.

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